

*Academics and Social Media Usage: The Role of Informal Communication on
Social Capital Development and Work Performance*

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Abstract

The use of social media in organizations including academia setting is important, relevant and pervasive. Scholarly discussion on social media status as an educational platform for innovative pedagogy and richer learning experience has been well established. However, the reliance and impact of social media as an informal platform among academics themselves are less explored. This qualitative study looked at the pattern of social media interaction and explored the role informal communication on social capital development and work performance among communication lecturers. More specifically, the research questions are: 1) What is the pattern of informal communication among lecturers? 2) To what extent does informal communication shapes social capital development and 3) In what ways do informal communication helps in work performance? This research paper draws from seven in-depth interviews with communication lecturers who are currently teaching in Malaysian private universities. The discussion on pattern of informal communication includes the common approach of usage (formal vs informal) and timing of usage. In terms of social capital development, the majority of them believed that the use of social media foster relationships through bond developed, but only if one is tactful and mindful is using them. The perceived performance of the lecturers have also been found to have increased mainly through better teamwork development via social media interaction.

Keywords: Informal Communication, Social Capital Development, Social Media

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Introduction

Globally, social media has grown to be essential in one's life and most would deem it unbearable to live without. Social media applications are growing by the day and utilized for various reasons due to one's demographic, socioeconomic status, and life experiences, among others. So understanding social media usage and its users to date is no longer about merely studying the types of media use or their level of activeness on social media, rather how the usage can translate into more meaningful relationship development which in turn would benefit its user in a more practical way i.e. work performance is more meaningful.

Statistically, it has been reported that about 70 per cent of Internet users in Malaysia are Facebook users. In fact, Malaysia is ranked in the top five in Asia with most Facebook users (Saodah & Shafizan, 2017). Besides Facebook, other data shows that in 2017, 51% of Malaysians are WhatsApp users while 13% are WeChat and 13% of them are Instagram users (Bernama, 2017). However, little is known about the clear advantages that these Malaysian get out of their relatively heavy social media usage.

The convergence of social media within the workplace realm is also an interesting arena that has not been well discussed especially among the academics in Malaysia. Among the limited highlighted usage previously done by the Ministry of Education (2018), it was argued that lecturers in private universities in Klang Valley, especially the Faculty of Communication tend to use their social media communication mainly for work related tasks. However, the authors believe that there are other latent functions that would have promoted the usage of social media among working colleagues.

Hence, this study was carried out to examine and investigate the role of WhatsApp as a tool of informal communication among lecturers and how its pattern of usage contribute towards social capital building and work performance.

Problem Statement

Past studies on social media and workplace, has always looked at it in terms of formal communication between colleagues. However, the academia has not been a popular chosen population in comparisons to other work industries. For those who did study on academia, the focus tended to be on interaction between lecturers and students and usually pedagogical related (Deng & Tavares, 2013; Ean & Lee, 2016; Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2015; Kassens-Noor, 2012). Thus, not much is known in regards to social media usage between lecturers within the Malaysian setting (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015).

The authors argue that studies of workplace is imperative as the outcome would benefit the organization in specific and the nation in general. Should there be evidence of the role of social media indirectly creating better relationship fostered and improving work performance of staff members, such findings would enable the organizations to leverage on such usage and uses it to its fullest advantage.

Methodologically, previous researches tended to carry out quantitative studies via survey. Though the findings are interesting and provide insights on valuable variables

and patterns, it is at the expense of losing the richer data that could be obtained from qualitative studies. Hence, it is in the interest of this research to explore the role of social media among lecturers and the extent that it contributes towards social capital development and work performance. The specific research objectives are as outlined in the next section.

Research Objective

RO1: To investigate the pattern of informal communication via WhatsApp among lecturers in private universities.

RO2: To analyze the extent that informal communication shapes social capital development

RO3: To study in what ways do informal communication helps in work performance

Literature Review

Usage of Social Media at the Work Place

Face-to-face informal communication has been the second nature for employees at work and may be preferred by employees due to its immediate response (Moyer, 2011). However, with the advancement of technology, informal communication has also transcended the physical world. Today, the way we communicate with acquaintances and colleagues within the organizations have had changed from the past years. This is made possible because reputable network company like Cisco has created social media for internal corporate uses for better working performance (Carr, 2011) and top-notch computer manufacturing companied like IBM did also substitute e-mail with other social media tools as preferred internal communication amongst other employees at different regions (Greenfield, 2011).

Thus, with the use of social media as an effective internal communication, everyone is accessible to the organisation and allows transparence room to voice out any concerns and problems (Kane et al., 2014; Leonardi, 2015 & Buettner, 2015). Another benefit that was highlighted in a longitudinal study about social media working performances on employees, it was found that social media enables managers and supervisors are able to keep their eyes on internal and external issues and crisis which might happen (Brady, 2012; Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012; Shami, Nichols, & Chen, 2014).

Social capital theory and Internal Communication

Social capital theory was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002). According to Bourdieu, one's life chances and reproduction of social structures often contributed by these three main capitals: economic, cultural and social capital. As commonly known, one's economic standing and status tend to place individuals at an advantages position due to the access that one could have just by the virtue of having money. Cultural capital refers to one's social assets that they embodied that ease the social mobility and increased life chances.

As for social capital, Bordieu argued that one's social network would give them the advantage in improving their social status in the society. Social capital is also trusting relationships that allow individuals to support one another and which in turn could

promote one's quality of life. Trusting relationships add opportunities and possibilities in our lives. Therefore, through building social capital, it creates trusting relationships and opportunities which allow individuals to help others in the community, improves the quality of life such jobs, recreation, spiritual life, transportation, as well as helps to solve problems together within the community (as cited in Claridge, 2015, p.1).

The theory of social capital has been argued by some scholars to be useful not only in understanding the individuals' life chances and social relations in society but also to further understand organizational culture within workplace. In fact, the research and findings can be useful to enhance the internal communication amongst the employees (Kevin, 2016; Kroon & Pierick et al., 2002).

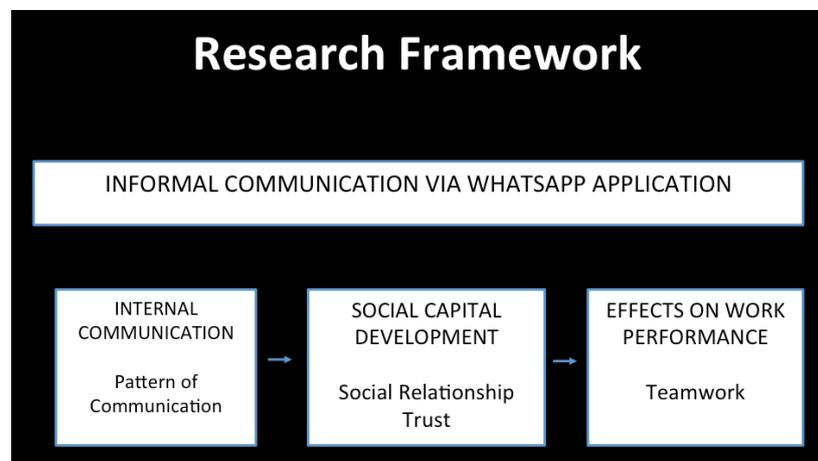
An example of study that adopted this lens was carried out by researchers from Iran who studied the development of Social Capital Theory (SCT) in an organisation (Sanjar Salajegheh & Nasrin Pirmoradi, 2013). As the result, it was found that trust was the most favourable variable that contribute towards the success of effective working performance. Similar result was also found by Qianhong (2004) and they added that bonding is second most favorable variable that contributes towards work performance.

Other scholars also showed evidence that working performance in any particular organisation can be understood by analyzing those institutions using social capital theory (Tantardini & Kroll, 2015).

Thus, this study adopted the lens of Social Capital Theory in relation to how it affects the work performance of lecturers in private institutions in Malaysia.

Research Framework

First component of the pattern of informal communication via WhatsApp application is internal communication that has the pattern of communication. It is believed to be the antecedent of social capital development, which the social relationship and trust that in turn, affects the work performances of staff members, namely teamwork.



Methodology

To answer the research objectives, the researcher adopted qualitative research approach. The population of this study are communication lecturers currently teaching in private universities in Klang Valley. Lecturers chosen for this study are those who are currently serving the universities in Klang Valley under the assumption that they are more exposed and more likely to use WhatsApp as an informal internal communication platform. According to the Ministry of Education (2018), there are 29 of private universities in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Table below summarizes the list of universities, location and number of communication lecturers.

Name of University	Location	No of Lecturers
1. Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur	<u>Kajang</u>	11
2. <u>Kolej</u> University Islam International Selangor	<u>Kajang</u>	16
3. <u>Limkokwing</u> University	<u>Cyberjaya</u>	20
4. Multimedia University	<u>Cyberjaya</u>	1
5. <u>Monash</u> University	<u>Subang Jaya</u>	3
6. Open University	<u>Kuala Lumpur</u>	6
7. <u>SEGi</u> University	<u>Kota Damansara</u>	13
8. Taylor's University	<u>Subang Jaya</u>	27
9. University Selangor	<u>Shah Alam</u>	16
10. XIAMEN University	<u>Sepang</u>	8
	TOTAL	121

Table 1: List of Private Universities in Klang Valley.

Study Sample

Based on the population outlined above, the universities were selected using simple random sampling method. Having said that, each sample of the population has equally likely as each other sample and each person has the same likelihood as other people.

By using table of random numbers, below are the lists of identified institutions for this research.

1. Open University, Kuala Lumpur
2. Monash University, Subang Jaya, Selangor
3. KUIS, Kajang, Selangor

4. IUKL, Kajang, Selangor
5. University Selangor (UNISEL), Shah Alam, Selangor

Then, 15 informants were selected from these institutions with 3 respondents from each institution. The reference list of the academicians were obtained through each institutional website as well as from the Dean / Head of faculty's school. Based on the list, informants were selected using simple random sampling. Regarding the techniques researcher did apply the simple random sampling which. However, out of the 15 selected respondents, only 7 were interviewed due to the non-responsiveness and unavailability. The response rate for this research is 47%.

Data Collection Method and Mode of Analysis

Once the respondents were identified, they were contacted via email or phone for interview session. The time, day and venue of the interview sessions were done based on the availability, preference and convenience of the respondents. Semi-structured interviews were carried out upon agreement with the respondents. On average, the face-to-face interview conducted was 1 hour and the interviews were recorded with permission. However three of the informants, I5, I6 and I7, prefer to not be recorded but was given the transcribed data for members' check procedure. The interview questions were adapted from Ceridwyn and Hyemi (2016) and the data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis.

Mode of analysis

Constant Comparative Method [CCM]

The data from the interviews were analyzed using constant comparative method. Upon completing the interview, the data were transcribed and manually summarized into codes and themes. The categories are then compared and analyzed to answer the research questions posed.

Findings and Discussion

To answer the research objectives of this study, questions pertaining to demographic information of respondents, social media usage pattern and personal opinion were asked. Their responses were analyzed and recorded as below.

		Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Age	30-35	1	14.2
	36-40	4	57
	41-45	1	14.2
	46-50	1	14.2
Gender	Female	4	57
	Male	3	43
Race	Malay	6	86
	<u>Kenyah</u>	1	14.2
	TOTAL	7	100

Table 2: Statistics of informants' Demographic Profile.

A total of 7 informants were interviewed and the response rate was 100%. As shown in table above, the majority of the respondents, which consists of 57% (4) of the informants, were between the ages of 36 and 40. This is followed by 14.2% (1) of the informant who was between the ages of 30 and 35 as well as 14.2% (1), 41 and 45, and another 14.2% (1) of the informant was between the ages of 46 to 50. The gender statistics of the respondents were 57% (4) of female and 43% (3) of male. As for the race, most of the respondents (6) were Malay (86%) and one of them was Kenyah. 14.2%.

The number of WhatsApp group that the respondents have been included in were tabulated – both within their department and with other departments.

No of <u>WhatsApp</u> group(s)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	1	14
2	3	43
3	2	29
4	0	0
5	1	14
TOTAL	7	100

Table 3: Number of WhatsApp Group(s) with Colleagues in the Same Department.

As shown in Table above, about 43% of the informants belong to at least one WhatsApp groups with the same department. And 29% of the respondents have more than two WhatsApp groups within the same department.

No of WhatsApp group(s)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	3	43
2	2	29
3	2	29
TOTAL	7	100

Table 4: Number of WhatsApp group(s) with colleagues from other department(s). As shown in Table above, majority of the informants 43%, were included in more than one WhatsApp groups with colleagues from other departments. Only 14% of them have only one WhatsApp group with colleagues from other departments. On top of that, their three preferred top social media were Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram.

Internal Communication

Pattern of Communication

When it comes to pattern of communication, most of the informants said that, when it comes to the colleagues, mainly they use informally. This is especially when they are handling urgent matters, sharing gossips, socializing with colleagues as well as spreading or obtaining information, articles and links. They said:

I use Facebook and WhatsApp official group communication to obtain relating any information. (I5)

I normally use these social media or WhatsApp for informal activities or socializing with colleagues. (I1)

In terms of time of usage the respondents generally do not use the social media during office hour. Rather, they tend to use them during lunch or after working hour. They said: I use social media during leisure. For instance during lunch hour. To be precise I spent an hour. If it on weekend I would spent more than an hour just. (I7)

Social Capital Development

The social media has been found to help social capital development mainly through better bonding but not much evidence supporting trusting relationship. The respondents have highlighted the fact that through social media interactions, they have developed their bonds. They said:

I trust that via this WhatsApp it could enhance our bond amongst colleagues. (I5)

It does can build our bond in terms of sharing private thoughts and being tactful not to post private matters in groups. (I7)

The findings also indicated that trust on the other hand takes more than superficial social media interaction. Instead, the respondents argue that face-to-face interaction is imperative in developing and maintaining trusting relationships. They said:

I do not think it can develop trust. It is quite irrelevant by sharing non-work related tasks such tips recipes and etc. (I1)

I personally believed that engaging in an informal communication especially non-work related tasks cannot increase trust amongst colleagues. I preferred to put aside such engagement. (I4)

Social Capital and Work Performance

Teamwork

The respondents were asked on whether they think their informal WhatsApp communication has affect their teamwork. According to the respondents, the bond and social capital that has been developed do help in enhancing teamwork. This is because they are able to seek for assistance, keep one another updated and share necessary information, even though they are physically remote. In their words;

Sometimes it really helps. This because in WhatsApp group, we can share information and interest. From there, we don't have to be together all the time (I2).

Regardless distance and time, I could still ask for favor from colleagues. For example, if I am on leave and need to revise my schedule for an appointment so I just text them by WhatsApp (I5).

By sharing updates or information on related work tasks. It surely does helps the team work (I4).

Therefore there is evidence that informal communication engaged via social media do help these lecturers in their teamwork, which in turn helps in their work performance.

Discussion

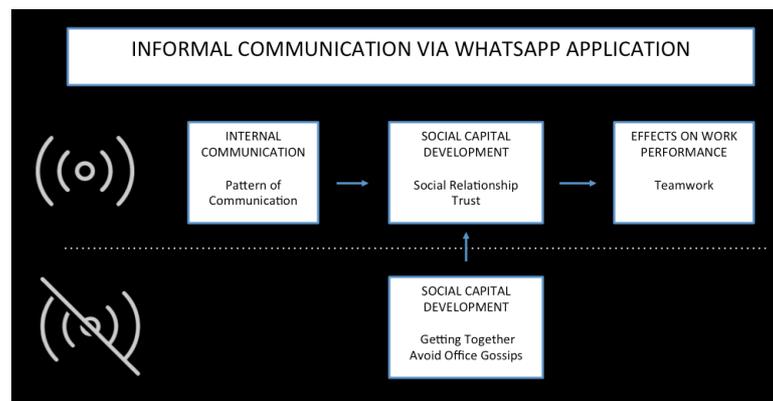
As referred to the research framework, first component of the pattern of informal communication via WhatsApp application is internal communication, which has the pattern of communication. Theoretically speaking, most of informant saying that, when it comes to the colleagues, mainly they use informally, for example for urgent matter, share gossips, spread information, articles etc.

Having said that, the second component it is believed to be the antecedent of social capital development. The respondents have highlighted the fact that through social media interactions, they have developed their bonds. The findings also indicated that trust on the other hand takes more than superficial social media interaction. Instead, the respondents argue that face-to-face interaction is imperative in developing and maintaining trusting relationships.

From the second component, which the social relationship and trust in turn affects the work performances of staff members, namely teamwork. According to the respondents, the bond and social capital that has been developed do help in enhancing teamwork. This is because they are able to seek for assistance, keep one another updated and share necessary information, even though they are physically remote

Generally speaking, based on my informant its evidence that WhatsApp is an important tool for development of bond. However not necessarily trust.

But from the bond itself is sufficient to help in term of working as a team. Hence, in order to further strengthen and increase the trust, and enhance team work offline are the things they needed as a support component.



Conclusion and Recommendation

This qualitative study looked at the pattern of social media interaction and explored the role informal communication on social capital development and work performance among communication lecturers. More specifically, the research questions are: 1) What is the pattern of informal communication among lecturers? 2) To what extent does informal communication shapes social capital development and 3) In what ways do informal communication helps in work performance?

This research paper draws from seven in-depth interviews with communication lecturers who are currently teaching in Malaysian private universities. The discussion on pattern of informal communication includes the common approach of usage (formal vs informal) and timing of usage. In terms of social capital development, the majority of them believed that the use of social media foster relationships through bond developed, but only if one is tactful and mindful is using them. The perceived performance of the lecturers have also been found to have increased mainly through better teamwork development via social media interaction.

Based on the study that has been done, it is recommended that future studies suggested to increase sample size to gain more rich data. Secondly, future researcher should look at other social media platforms to see the outcomes namely Instagram and Twitter as they were rated among the top three most commonly used. Thirdly, compare the relationship between gender and age, does these variables has to do with the informal pattern via social media in an organizations.

Also, it is recommended that adopting different approach of methodology and theory in data collection such as in quantitative study, survey questionnaire or field observation.

Long story short, social media is important and yet we are human still who need physical touch, and face-to-face communication. This is just another platform for us to enhance and keep in touch.

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